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COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN
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Item 5 (a) and (b) of the provisional agenda*

PRIORITY THEMES

EQUALITY: ELIMINATION OF DE JURE AND DE FACTO DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

DEVELOPMENT: INTEGRATION OF WOMEN IN THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT

Statement submitted by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council: International Alliance of Women, International Council on Social Welfare, Soroptimist International, Zonta International (category I); All-India Women's Conference, Associated Country Women of the World, Bahá'í International Community, International Commission of Jurists, International Council of Jewish Women, International Federation of University Women, International Federation of Women Lawyers, Socialist International Women, World Federation of Methodist Women, World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 29 and 30 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968.

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1. The above-mentioned non-governmental organizations wish to emphasize the cross sectoral nature of two of the priority themes: equality: elimination of de jure and de facto discrimination against women; and development: the integration of women in the process of development.

2. In paragraph 44 of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies it is stated that, "the inequality of women in most countries stems to a very large extent from mass poverty and the general backwardness of the majority of the world's population caused by underdevelopment. ... The unfavourable status of women is aggravated in many countries, developed and underdeveloped, by de facto discrimination on the grounds of sex". International statistics (The World's Women 1970 - 90/ST/ESA/STAT SER.K/89) indicate that on any measure of health, education and employment, women count as the majority of the world's poor.

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There is, in consequence, a direct relationship between achieving equal rights for women, i.e. the elimination of je jure and de facto discrimination and the successful integration of women in development.

3. The General Assembly of the United Nations has demonstrated its commitment to advance the status of women as a result of accepting the Forward-looking Strategies by consensus and through subsequent measures to support this decision. Since 1985, many Governments have taken the relevant steps to ensure both men and women enjoy equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities so that legislation exists in an increasing number of countries outlawing de jure discrimination. As noted by members of the Commission itself, it is much more difficult to observe similar changes in regard to de facto discrimination, the area in which the Commission on the Status of Women plays a central role.

4. This lack of progress is highlighted by General Assembly resolution 46/653, which calls again upon Member States to give priority to policies and programmes relating to the subthemes employment, health and education, in particular, literacy to empower women and ensure their equal participation in society.

5. To achieve real change however, greater attention must be given to the use of tradition and customary law. These elements in society, most frequently lie at the heart of gender-based stereotyping and hence the continued existence of de jure and de facto discrimination towards women. Such gender-based stereotyping, for example, underpins the tradition that women should be entirely responsible for unpaid household production. Also social education in gender roles leaves the onus of domestic well-being to women and accounts for the continued existence of a segregated labour market. Gender-based stereotyping is equally responsible for negative attitudes to women at all stages of the life cycle and, in particular, towards ageing and elderly women.

6. In this connection we wish to commend:

(a) The work already undertaken by the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities with regard to traditional practices affecting the health of women and children;

(b) The written statement by non-governmental organizations presented to the Chair of the First Preparatory Committee for the World Conference on Human Rights (1993) with regard to the need for an in-depth study on the effect tradition plays in the application of international standards concerning human rights;

(c) The resolution of the General Assembly of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGO), 31 October 1991, which calls on the Secretary-General to charge the Centre for Human Rights with producing a study for the World Conference on Human Rights on customary law and tradition as it affects the enjoyment of human rights.

7. It is clear however, that the effect of tradition, customary law and stereotyping have special implications with regard to women and the measures necessary for their effective integration in development.

8. In order to advance the intentions expressed in paragraph 65 of the Forward-looking Strategies regarding the need for in-depth research, we request the Commission to investigate the causes of the deeply rooted

resistance towards advancing the status of women, which stems from tradition, customary law and stereotyping, for example, by holding a seminar or undertaking an in-depth study on the issue. Case-studies of successful programmes, where communities have come to modify local tradition in order to eliminate discrimination towards women should be examined and publicized.

9. The findings of the investigation should be made available to the Commission at its thirty-seventh session in 1993. We further recommend that they form part of the documentation submitted to the World Conference on Human Rights by the Commission.